

POLL: STATE SUPPORTS DEVELOPMENT

By Peter Johnson

Montanans are eager to develop the state's natural resources to create more good-paying jobs, according to a recent poll conducted for the Montana Chamber of Commerce.

Poll respondents resoundingly voiced support for development, 68 percent to 18 percent, when they were asked whether the state government should encourage and promote the mining, timber and oil and gas industries because of the jobs and economic benefits they provide, or restrict and discourage those industries because of potential environmental impacts.

A strong majority — 63 percent to 25 percent — majority also think that businesses can be expected to do the right thing when it comes to protecting the environment.

Eight-hundred Montana voters were surveyed the second week of November, giving the poll an error margin of plus or minus 3.5 percentage points, chamber officials said.

"We are pleased that Montana voters are behind business on important economic issues," said Webb Brown, president and CEO of the Montana Chamber. "They understand that a thriving, healthy business community is a key to creating good-paying jobs and more state revenues.

"The recent state budget surpluses are due in part to the natural resources boom," Brown said. "Montanans obviously can connect the dots. They want to see more resource development so we can continue to enjoy surpluses and wage growth in the future."

A conservationist disputed the wording of the question he said pitted development against environment and said other studies have shown preservation of open spaces, wildlands and a clean environment draw tourists and new residents to Montana.

"The question was phrased in a way that almost guaranteed an overwhelmingly positive response because jobs are important to Montanans," said Chris Mehl, communications director for the Wilderness Society. "Our group isn't against encouraging mineral development, but believes it's got to be done right.

"It's clear that Montanans want environmental safeguards to accompany development, because they've voted twice by big majorities to restrict the cyanide-heap leaching mine method," Mehl added.

"Even with the current energy boom, oil and gas contributes a remarkably small percentage to personal income in Montana and across the Rockies," he said — 0.8 percent of personal income in Montana in 2005.

He quoted a study by Western economists, including Larry Swanson of the University of Montana, which said preservation of public lands and recreational opportunities have become increasingly important to the economy.

"The driver of the economic expansion that has occurred in the larger Rocky Mountain West region over the last 15 years is the amenities that have attracted more and more people, business and income," Swanson said.

Other results of the Montana Chamber survey include:

- Montanans believe the state economy is on the right track by a 54 percent to 27 percent margin and 57 percent believe state government is on the right track, while 26 percent said it is not.

In reviewing results of earlier Montana Chamber polls, Jon Bennion, chamber government relations director, said that "Montanans tend to look favorably at state government so long as the economy is doing well."

- Despite the state's stormy and closely divided 2007 legislative session that had to meet in a special session to resolve the budget, 42 percent of those surveyed said they would probably vote to re-elect their local legislators, with 38 percent saying they would prefer to give someone else a chance.
- Respondents said that if state government continues to see budget surpluses, they would prefer permanent tax relief over one-time tax rebates by a 45 percent to 26 percent margin.
- About 28 percent said health care costs were their top financial concern, followed by higher energy costs at 16 percent; taxes and their children's education, both 11 percent; and a secure retirement, 10 percent.